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INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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UNCLAS JERUSALEM 004566

SIPDIS

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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE; NEA/IPA FOR
WILLIAMS/SHAMPAINE/STEINGER; NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WATERS;
TREASURY FOR SZUBIN/LOEFFLER/NUGENT/HIRSON

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PREL PGOV ECON ETRD KWBG KPAL IS
SUBJECT: PALESTINIANS SEEK PROGRESS ON GAZA-WEST BANK LINK
AMA IMPLEMENTATION

REF: A. JERUSALEM 4511
     ¶B. JERUSALEM 4472

¶1. (C) Summary: ConGenoffs, accompanied by USSC, USAID and
Embassy Tel Aviv representatives, met October 17 with
Palestinians who were involved in the negotiation of the
Agreement on Movement and Access (AMA). The informal
meeting, the third and final in a series of preliminary
brainstorming discussions intended to reinvigorate AMA
implementation efforts, focused on the implementation of a
Gaza-West Bank link as well as on movement within the West
Bank (reported SEPTEL). The Palestinians, led by
representatives of the PLO's Negotiations Support Unit (NSU)
and including former Minister of Planning Ghassan al-Khatib,
reiterated that they had never found the initial Israeli
proposal for a passenger convoy feasible, but they are still
willing to accept those suggestions as a pilot program for
moving people between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. While
truck convoy discussions had not commenced in late 2005, the
NSU reviewed the successful truck convoy system that operated
between 1996 and 2000 and advocated a similar operation for
AMA truck convoys. End Summary.

Passenger Convoys

¶2. (C) The original GOI proposal for the movement of
passenger by bus, which specified one round-trip convoy per
day and placed restrictions on who could use the busses,
would have allowed only Gaza Palestinian identity card
holders to travel, excluding West Bank ID holders and those
without Palestinian IDs. Those using the busses would be
limited to a maximum stay in the West Bank of ten days, and
there would have been limited access for males aged 16 to 35.
Negotiations stalled in December of 2005 when the Palestinian
Authority requested a specific time-frame when the pilot
could be re-evaluated and, if appropriate, opened to both
Gazans and West Bankers with a more flexible length of stay
policy.

¶3. (C) According to former Minister of Planning Ghassan
al-Khatib, the Palestinians had agreed to accept what they
considered to be an inadequate proposal from the GOI for the
passenger convoys at the recommendation of the Consul
General. Al-Khatib said, "We said, 'we agree that this is a
beginning. We agree to start,'" with the understanding that
it was a start and would be expanded and improved.

Permits Are Not The Solution

¶4. (C) Zeinah Salahi, legal advisor for the NSU, said for
those for whom the convoys would not work (those who needed
to stay longer) or who weren't eligible for the convoys, the
GOI had said they would expand the number of humanitarian
permits. She said that far from solving the issue, the
situation had gotten worse. While the PA is permitted to
request humanitarian permits for medical cases and students,
al-Khatib said the number of permits actually issued had
declined dramatically, adding that if the crossings are
closed the permit is invalid. Convoys, as a system for
internal Palestinian movement, should operate even during
closure when Palestinian access to Jerusalem and green-line
Israel is denied, Salahi noted.

A Useful Model For Truck Convoys:
The Safe Passage Protocol

¶5. (C) Salahi suggested that the 1996-2000 system for truck
movement could serve as a useful model for truck convoys
under the AMA. Salahi said that for several years prior to
the second Intifada, there was a "healthy movement" of goods
from Karni and Tarqumiya, with as many as 300 trucks per day
traveling in convoys of 15 trucks on several routes, not just
to and from the West Bank, but to Israeli ports and packing
houses as well. Salahi said each convoy contained 15 trucks
and had an Israeli army escort in the front and rear. Trucks
were required to arrive at the crossing one hour prior to
exiting Gaza or the West Bank for security screening. There
were no security incidents involving the truck convoys.

¶6. (C) Participants in the meeting said they were open to a
variety of means to insure the security of the truck convoys,
including Israeli escorts or tracking devices as well as new
scanning technologies to check the goods being transported at
the crossings. Saad Khatib, a Trade Policy Advisor with
PalTrade, said that once a means to transport goods is
established investors from the private sector would "find a
way" to fill any gaps in funding and technology.

Next Steps: Implementing the Pilot Program

¶7. (C)   Al-Khatib noted that the Palestinian side would
likely still be willing to start with the more restricted
passenger convoy proposal. Both Salahi and al-Khatib agree
that finding a way to establish a connection between the West
Bank and Gaza is vital to both Gaza's current economic
survival and to the future establishment of a viable
Palestinian state. Al-Khatib said, "Gaza is not economically
viable on its own. The Israelis not only disengaged Gaza from
Israel, but they also disengaged it from the West Bank."

WALLES